

DREW O'CONNOR, MPH ■ CHRISTOPHER T. GATES, MPA

## Toward a Healthy Democracy

### SYNOPSIS

Because it represents a revival of citizen responsibility, the Healthy Communities movement is not only a health and quality-of-life movement but a civic and democratic movement as well. Healthy Communities efforts need to seek meaningful partnerships with local governments and work their collaborative and citizen-based efforts into formal local political structures. As the foundation of the Healthy Communities movement, civic renewal should be elevated as a major theme and goal for its future.

Mr. O'Connor is Director of the Healthy Communities Program of the National Civic League. Mr. Gates is President of the National Civic League and Co-Chair of the Civic Practices Network.

Address correspondence to: Mr. O'Connor,  
NCL, 1445 Market St., Suite 300, Denver  
CO 80202; tel. 303-571-4343; fax 303-571-  
4404; <drewo@ncl.org>.

Over the past 10 years, Healthy Communities has gained momentum as a health and quality of life movement in the United States. In the health care and public health arenas, its proponents have, to an impressive degree, succeeded in broadening the concept of health—what creates it, how we measure it, and what actions we take to preserve it. Often not discussed, however, is Healthy Communities as a civic and democratic movement. Because it represents a revival of citizen responsibility, Healthy Communities broadens our definition of democracy from just showing up at the polls every two years to more hands-on participation in community decision-making. This creates the opportunity to move from a purely representative political decision-making practice to an active, more muscular democracy that relies on the informed judgment of its citizens. Two areas in which Healthy Communities has had, and can continue to have, an impact on civic renewal are public deliberation<sup>1</sup> and

community problem-solving, and community governance—the relationship between the citizen sector and local government.

## PUBLIC DEBATE VS PUBLIC DELIBERATION

In the early history of our nation and through the 19th century, citizens came together at town hall meetings to discuss the issues of the day. These meetings were arenas in which people could express an opinion, press a view, and take part in community decision-making. Consequently, these meetings were key components of building a strong civil society that provided balance to the growing influence of the private sector and government.

Unfortunately, this tradition has largely fallen by the wayside. Replacing it is a brand of issue-specific activism that employs debate as an operating system. The energy Americans once exercised to address shared community concerns is now being expended on issue-specific debates that hamper citizens' ability to view community challenges in the total community context. This has led to a degree of rancor in community life that polarizes people, organizations, and political parties. Participants in this system spend more time winning debates and defeating opponents than finding plausible solutions to community problems.

The root of this problem can be found in the difference between public debate and public deliberation. In debate, points of view are argued and defended until one argument proves stronger. This process is designed to produce a winner and a loser and promotes a win-at-all-costs approach. Deliberation, on the other hand, is a discussion process that uncovers underlying values among similar and differing points of view. Its goal is to identify converging values that lead to consensus-based decisions. Deliberation uses a deeper level of communication that requires a commitment from all involved parties to standards of conduct, or ground rules, by which they comport themselves.

Every community across the country has what we at the National Civic League (NCL) call civic infrastructure—the capacities, competencies, and formal and

informal processes and networks through which communities make decisions and solve problems. Based on our work with communities across the country, we have developed a tool called the Civic Index, which measures civic infrastructure. In our application of the Civic Index, we have found that communities that solely employ debate and do not develop the ability for deliberation gradually chip away at their civic infrastructure. Thus, they damage their foundation for community decision-making. Without intervention directed toward *how* a community makes decisions, it will continue in its dysfunction, caught in a web of debate, polarization, and zero-sum community battles.

On the other hand, communities that make an effort to create a "safe space" for productive deliberation learn how to function at a higher level of consciousness. As John Kesler, a Healthy Communities activist from Utah, writes, these communities "tend to become inclusive of all stakeholders, reference shared values and culture, and encourage win/win/win approaches."<sup>2</sup> Further, as the growing civic infrastructure develops trust and establishes norms of reciprocity, it creates a generative effect, catalyzing further development of the community's civic infrastructure.

In its citizen-based approach to community problem-solving, Healthy Communities offers a great opportunity to enhance communities' ability to move from debate to deliberation and create norms of shared values and a deeper level of community understanding. The principles of Healthy Communities—broad definition of

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health, focus on root cause issues, systems change—compel citizens to view community challenges holistically, thereby drawing people away from the trap of issue-specific fragmentation and competition. Furthermore, Healthy Communities encourages broad community ownership and, consequently, dilutes the power of single-issue politics. Healthy Communities initiatives also have the potential to positively impact the local electoral process, holding political candidates and the media to the same standards of conduct that are employed in community public deliberation and challenging them to talk about issues that concern the community rather than focusing on the negative characteristics of their opponents.

A current NCL project illustrates the power of a deliberative, safe-space approach to community problem-solving. A small, Western, urban community (not identified because this is an ongoing project) has been paralyzed by partisan politics for nearly two years. The opposing political parties have waged war using the entire community as their battleground. Newspaper opinion columns, direct mail to citizens, signs hanging from community establishments, and bitter city council meetings have all contributed to the dysfunction of this community. While some political leaders feel this is a fight worth fighting, most citizens are dismayed by the current mode of operation and feel powerless to create a change.

Several months ago, NCL began work with this community on a collaborative visioning and strategic planning process. Using many of the same principles, processes, and tools employed in Healthy Communities efforts, a cross-section of community stakeholders were brought together to determine community priorities for the future. At first citizens were doubtful that any process that included leaders of the political establishments could be anything but rancorous. As NCL facilitators laid the ground rules for the effort and focused citizens on broader community concerns, however, the tenor of the dialogue changed. The group has agreed to prohibit personal attacks, listen to fellow citizens, and stay clear of single-issue agendas. The energy in the room is palpable as participants feel safe in expressing their opinions and engaging others in a productive community dialogue. Those who regress to the old mode of attack and debate are kept in check by other participants who much prefer the new deliberative approach. One hopes this method of community dialogue will become infectious, spreading to other areas of community life.

#### HEALTHY COMMUNITIES — BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG PUBLIC, PRIVATE, NONPROFIT, AND CITIZEN SECTORS

More and more, nontraditional players in communities across the country are engaging in the political process. The days when citizens fundamentally trusted their offi-

cial to represent their interests well are long gone. People often view their officials with a presumption of bad intent, looking for ulterior motives when policy proposals are issued.

In a 1998 poll of Americans ages 18 to 30, nearly half (46%) pointed to schools, universities, and colleges—entities that empower, teach, and provide skills to young people so that they can become involved in, and contribute to, their community—as important in solving future problems.<sup>3</sup> Further, 27% believed that groups of people working together locally will be most important in addressing the problems that we will face in the future, and one in five (20%) cited partnerships among government, private businesses, and nonprofit organizations as important. Only 13% of those polled believed that government and political leaders will be effective in solving our future problems.

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This poll expresses an emerging attitude in the United States: that our democratic political structure, as currently configured, is not effective in solving our problems. What we have seen, as a result, is an increasingly disillusioned American public opting out of a political process they feel cannot serve their interests or those of their community. This has led to steadily decreasing voter turnout at the national level and across the country locally. While some call this apathy, it is actually a pragmatic decision to reject a system that does not appear to serve commu-

nity interests. Furthermore, we learn from this survey that “people working together locally” and “partnerships among government, private businesses, and nonprofit organizations”—the kinds of grassroots and cross-sectoral partnerships espoused by the Healthy Communities movement—are seen as viable forms of community problem-solving.

Local government officials and professionals, however, have begun to react to this trend. In our experience in working with thousands of communities across the country, we've seen that local governments increasingly view their role in community problem-solving as that of convener of the various sectors and citizens rather than the sole entity responsible for making policy. Where citizens were once engaged to ratify a plan or proposal developed by local officials and traditional leaders, now local governments are engaging citizens in the decision-making

from the beginning. An indicator of this trend is the growing emphasis placed on facilitation and mediation skills on the part of local government employees. City managers acknowledge their role is moving toward "community building, which essentially involves building political capacity—the capacity to make collective decisions amid diverse and conflicting interests. A crucial component of this capacity is developing a sense of responsibility among citizens to participate in and obligate themselves to collective decisions."<sup>4</sup>

Healthy Communities efforts, therefore, need to tap into the community-building trend of the public sector by, first and foremost, viewing their work as part of the community's political and democratic process. Second, these initiatives must actively pursue meaningful partnerships with local governments so that resources, power, and shared vision developed through Healthy Communities forums can become a part of the formal policy development process convened by local government.

An example of the changing relationships between citizens and government is evidenced in the story of a community that the NCL has worked with since 1992. Lee's Summit, Missouri, is a community that grew from 40,000 people to more than 60,000 in less than a decade. The impact and strain of the growth began to surface through suspicion and mistrust across the sectors of the community. In particular, there was a lot of mistrust between citizens and city government. Citizens believed that government didn't heed or serve the interests of the community, and city government officials felt attacked and constantly on the defensive for policies and initiatives they saw to be in the community's best interest.

The city decided to convene a group of citizens and representatives from the business and nonprofit sectors to work together with government on these and other issues. With NCL facilitation, this larger group of community stakeholders created a vision and strategic plan for the future. Participants developed action plans for economic development, public services, and specific quality-of-life issues. The city government incorporated many of the same principles of convening stakeholders

for other challenging issues. The results have been startling. Where initiatives were previously battered at the polls, all 12 of the ballot initiatives attempted since this new way of doing business was introduced have passed. Additionally, through collaborative effort across sectors, the city of Lee's Summit has achieved 40 of the original 45 goals established in the strategic plan. Residents do not claim they have a perfect community, but they have figured out how to incorporate citizens, business, and nonprofits into the city government decision- and policy-making process.

## CONCLUSION

Currently, Healthy Communities practitioners are in a struggle to prove that the partnerships and strategies developed over the past 10 years of the movement have yielded improved quality-of-life outcomes for citizens. It is a necessary focus to attract resources, build momentum, and sustain the movement. Yet equally if not more important is the social, cultural, and normative change a Healthy Communities approach can effect. The long-term transformation desired by Healthy Communities proponents will occur as a result of a shift in the way we convene, communicate, make decisions, and move into action. These are not readily measured and can't always be achieved in specific time horizons; nonetheless, they are at the core of Healthy Communities.

As decision-making is spread more widely and thinly across the many interests of the community, creating a safe civic space to promote meaningful deliberation that leads to decisions based on common values will be crucial to the success of our communities. Working our collaborative and citizen-based efforts into the formal local political structure will not only create policy that reflects the values of citizens but will hasten the reform of local government from a purely representative form to a highly participatory and dynamic decision-making structure. In short, civic renewal is the foundation of the Healthy Communities movement and, thus, should be elevated as a major theme and goal for its future.

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